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Washington Agricultural Jobs Dip in 2001

OLYMPIA – The number of agricultural workers in Washington dropped last year to its lowest level since the mid-1990s, according to a new report released today by the Washington State Employment Security Department.

Fewer workers were paid to harvest virtually all crops. One exception was the grape industry, which saw a 23 percent increase in workers, according to the report titled *Agricultural Workforce in Washington State 2001*.

On average, 83,877 agricultural workers were employed in the state in 2001, a 2 percent drop from the previous year. Season agricultural jobs were down 12.5 percent to 28,800.

“The fall in seasonal work was in large part due to a drop in harvested acreage for many of the state’s labor-intensive crops, but particularly apples,” said Employment Security Commissioner Sylvia P. Mundy.

Forty-three percent of seasonal jobs were in the apple industry, which employed 12,455 persons in 2001 – 24 percent fewer than in 2000.

Other industries that played prominently in seasonal work losses included asparagus, onions, and miscellaneous vegetables, which experienced workforce declines of 13, 30, and 31 percent, respectively.

However, Washington’s wine industry was the driving force for a 23 percent increase in the number of those working with grapes. Harvested grape acreage was up 20 percent in 2001 and, on average, there were 275 more seasonal employees than the previous year.

Turnover in agricultural jobs was typically high and hours worked were lower. Only 56 percent of people working on farms in 2000 returned in 2001. Furthermore, the average number of annual hours worked per employee fell from 889 in 2000 to 861 in 2001.

As usual, most jobs were concentrated in the South Central region, which includes Yakima and Klickitat counties. More than one out of every four of the state’s agricultural workers was employed in this area in 2001, almost all in Yakima County.

The North Central area, which includes Chelan, Douglas, Kittitas and Okanogan counties, was the second largest agricultural area in the state in terms of employment, with 19 percent of the state’s total agricultural workers in 2001.

Cherries, grapes, and asparagus employed the most workers, following apples.

“This report highlights the vital role of the agriculture industry and agricultural workers in our state and the importance of this information for growers and workers alike,” said Mundy. “For growers, the ability to anticipate and to plan for labor needs is critical to timely and efficient harvesting. Farm workers and those who provide services for them also have the need to know if and where work is available.”

Agricultural Workforce in Washington State 2001 is available online at <http://www.wa.gov/esd/lmea/pubs/ag01.pdf>. Copies of the report can also be obtained by calling John Wines at (800) 215-1617.

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